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2. FRESH LOOK AT ANCIENT CHRISTIANS OF NAJRÂN AND PRESENT RELIGIOUS DIALOGUES

Sharif al-Hasan

In his article, "The Meeting of the Prophet Muḥammad with Christians from Najrân and the Present Muslim-Christian Dialogue", Dr. Jan Slomp has raised lively issues, which deserve to be examined¹.

Although modern research has shed new light on the history of the ancient Christians of Najrân, our information remains scanty and fragmentary. While in his recent work Irfan Shahid describes the discovery of the *Book of the Himyarites* and Sabaic inscriptions as two major breakthroughs and the discovery of a new letter by Simeon of Beth-Arsham and of the Arabic version of the Greek *Martyrium Arethae* as a matter of considerable importance, he acknowledges:

" many problems remain unsolved . . . owing to the state of the sources, exiguous, conflicting, of various orders, and written from different points of view . . . these very discoveries . . . have also bred a host of new problems and have not solved some of the old ones . . . " ²

Jan Slomp acknowledges in his introductory remarks, "The intention of my article is to present material for thought from a point of view which betrays congeniality with the faith of the Najrânites" (p. 119).

What encourages one to enter into a dialogue on a subject bristling with scholarly no less than psychological difficulties is the belief that, whatever the setbacks in the relations between the Muslims and the Christians—or even between peoples of any two religions—these relations have in the larger view of the recent past shown an over-all improvement in the third quarter of the twentieth century over the state of affairs in its first half, and that these relations promise to be still better in the ensuing last quarter of the century. In dealing with any unpleasant episodes of the past, care has, nevertheless, to be taken that critical studies remain sober and restrained and do not arouse passions, harming improvement of relations between the communities. Whereas administering of a traumatic shock to an individual, suffering mentally, by a sympathetic psychoanalyst may produce a healing effect, the analogy might sometimes break down when extended to the treacherous terrain of mass psychology. If historical analysis, honest according to one's own lights, impinges on another community's religious beliefs, an inept or inpat

treatment can bring harm. Only a Muslim, who has worked in a Christian country for as long and with similar motivation as Jan Slomp has done in Pakistan, would be the properly qualified person to tackle the ticklish problem of Muslim-Christian relations with a matching measure of scholarship, concern, sympathy and finesse.

Reference to Najrān in the Qur'ān

Referring to Beeston's article on Abraha in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*³, Jan Slomp surmises that in about the year 570 A.D. the South Arabian King Abraha made an attempt to conquer Mecca and Medina, though the article itself makes no mention of Medina. According to Sūra al-Fil ('The Elephant,' no. 105) of the Qur'ān, Mecca was saved miraculously. What were Abraha's motives? That he was trying to strengthen his independence over against Abyssinia by conquering new territory in the north⁴, appears to be implausible. Because Abraha had had a rapprochement with Abyssinia and had agreed to pay tribute to King Hellestheaios' successor⁵. On the other hand, the suggestion that Abraha intended to destroy the Ka'ba in Mecca and that he wanted to divert the pilgrimage to the newly-built cathedral in San'a, does not seem to be far-fetched. 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī and Maulawī Muḥammad 'Alī⁶ have not, as implied by Jan Slomp⁷, advanced any opinions of their own. They have merely drawn upon ancient reports (which are mentioned in detail in the second article on Abraha by Prof. M. Hamidullah in the *Urdū Encyclopaedia of Islam*)⁸. That, according to Ibn Bukayr, the newly-built cathedral in San'a had golden domes⁹ lends further support to the ancient reports. Beeston claims, "the details of Abraha's life given by Muslim historians are largely stories of folk-lore origin which have been attached arbitrarily to the name of a famous personage. For authentic information we must turn to Procopius and the Himyaritic inscriptions". But Professor Hamidullah points out that local traditions should be preferred to hearsay reports of the Byzantine historian.

The conjecture that Abraha's campaign was directed against Yathrib (Medina), because "the Jews of Yathrib had incited Yūsuf Dhū Nuwās to make war against Najrān"¹⁰, does not seem to hold water on more than one grounds. Firstly, the Himyarite King Dhū Nuwās, who was next door to Najrān, would hardly need incitement of the far distant Yathrib to attack Najrān. Secondly, as Najrān was on the trade route from the East which came up through South Arabia and then ran parallel with the coast through Mecca to Syria¹¹, economic rivalry with Mecca rather than Yathrib is more probable. Thirdly, what is much more significant, well over forty years separate Abraha's expedition in 570 A.D. from the persecution of the Christians of Najrān some time between 518 and 524 A.D.¹² Dhū Nuwās had met swift retribution at the hands of the Abyssinians and taken his own life. Abraha was one of the commanders in the campaign, which resulted in the overthrow of the Himyarites and the conquest of their kingdom¹³. Is it at all probable that in his old age, when he would more likely be actuated by religious and missionary fervour, Abraha would be fired by an old, old grudge against Yathrib? Irfan Shahid does not also mention any economic competition between Najrān and Yathrib¹⁴.

As regards the reference to *Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd* in the Qur'ān (85:4-10), one is inclined to agree with the ancient and modern Muslim commentators that these verses allude to the persecution of the Najrānite Christians¹⁵. This is not the occasion to deal at length with the controversy; but the interpretations of the Jewish scholar J. Horowitz, Richard

Bell and Rudi Paret leave one unconvinced¹⁶. If *Ukhdūd* (trench) be a synonym of *Jahannam* or *Jahīm*, then those who are condemned to the Hell cannot logically be cursed with being slain (*qutila*), a punishment much milder than the eternal torments of hell-fire. The imperfect tense of the verb *Yaf'alūn* in verse 7, which seems to refer vividly to an historical event, also weighs against an eschatological interpretation. Moreover, the rhyming end words of the verses (2 to 6) go to prove that they follow the pattern of the obscure word *Ukhdūd* rather than that the case is the other way about.

'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī was perhaps influenced by the Orientalists. The description "Fire supplied (abundantly) with Fuel" (verse 5) cannot apply to "the burning rays of the Arabian summer Sun"¹⁷ by any stretch of the imagination.

The word *qutila*, if taken literally to mean "were killed" applies to the Jews who burnt the Christians alive, because they were soon afterwards killed by the Abyssinian invaders in vengeance; or it applies to them metaphorically, imprecating repeated deaths in eternal hell-fire upon those cruel Jews. Incidentally, as regards the persecution of the Najrānite Christians, the facsimile of the Arabic version of the Greek *Martyrium Arethae* (plate XIX), given by Irfan Shahīd¹⁸, speaks of the fire trench. However, the influence of the Qur'ānic version on this fable cannot be ruled out.

The third and last reference to the Christians of Najrān in the Qur'ān appears to be in the 3rd Sūra, Āl-'Imrān (verses 59 to 61):

ان مثل عيسى عند الله كمثل آدم خلقه من تراب ثم قال له كن فيكون - الحق
من ربك فلا تكن من الممترين - فمن حاجك فيه من بعد ما جاءك من العلم فقل
تعالوا ندع ابناءنا و ابناءكم ونساءنا ونساءكم وانفسنا وانفسكم ثم يتهل
فنجعل لعنت الله على الكذابين -

"59. Lo! the likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him: Be! and he is.

60. (This is) the truth from thy Lord (O Muḥammad), so be not thou of those who waver.

61. And whoso disputeth with thee concerning him, after the knowledge which hath come unto thee, say (unto him): Come! We will summon our sons and your sons, and our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves, then we will pray humbly (to our Lord) and (solemnly) invoke the curse of Allah upon those who lie." Marmaduke Pickthal, *The Glorious Qur'ān* (Lahore: Taj Company, n.d.).

Without going into the details with regard to the *sabab al-nuzūl* or reason for the revelation of these verses, let us take up the version of al-Balādhurī¹⁹ first. According to him, there came to the Prophet the military chief and the civil chief, delegated by the people of Najrān in al-Yemen, and asked for terms which they made on behalf of the people of Najrān... (p. 98). On page 99, they are described as two monks from Naj-

rân. As Jan Slomp has explained²⁰, the confusion is perhaps removed by a reference to Ibn Sa'd²¹.

That the Holy Prophet had allowed the Najrânite Christians to pray in the Mosque in Madina provides Slomp (page 123) with the 'very important guideline' that at least in emergencies the religious communities should provide places for worship for believers of other communities, so long as the groups concerned have no places of their own. In the context of the violent agitation throughout the Islamic World since early 1976 over an Israeli court's ruling, permitting the Jews to pray in al-Aqṣā Mosque, it was hardly the time to make the suggestion that Slomp chose to make. This is the kind of traumatic shock that is bound to lead to an ugly chain-reaction, referred to in our introductory remarks. The symbolic gesture of goodwill shown by the Spanish Christians to the Muslims by inviting them to perform just for once the prayers on Friday, the 13th of September 1974, in the former mosque of Cordova²², after a lapse of about 740 years since its conquest in 1236 A.D., hardly offers an analogy.

Slomp's second important point that the subjects dealt with during the Broumana consultations in July 1972 between the Christians and Muslims²³ were in line with the religious conversation between the Prophet and the Bishop of Najrân is well taken. But, in the present-day world where relations among the peoples of the world are growing at an accelerated pace, it would be a further step in the right direction if such dialogues were thrown open to the followers of other religions also, and were even sponsored by official bodies of other religions as well as the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

The Mubâhala

To give Ibn Sa'd's report of the *Mubâhala* (invocation of curse) between the Prophet and the Najrânite Christians^{23a}, 'Abd al-Masih, the 'Aqib or leader and the two wise men of them... said, "We think it proper not to curse each other"... then they returned to their land. Al-Sayyid (son of Hārith... and in charge of their journey) did not stay there but for a short while. Then they returned to the Prophet and *embraced Islam*. Their predilection for Islam seems to be the main reason for their refusal to have a *mubâhala*.

Incidentally, such voluntary conversions to Islam among the Najrânite Christians do not appear to have been solitary instances. Quoting *The Life of Muḥammad*²⁴, G. Parrinder reports²⁵, "From the Christian centre at Najrân visits were paid to Muḥammad on several occasions. Twenty Christians visited him in Mecca either from Najrân or Abyssinia. It is said that when they heard the Qur'ân 'their eyes flowed with tears and they accepted God's call, believed in him, and declared his truth.' Then they went home."

As for Abū Hāritha ibn 'Alqama, the Bishop of Najrân, it is interesting to reproduce an anecdote from *The Life of Muḥammad*²⁶:

"When they set out from Najrân to see the Apostle, Abū Hāritha was riding on a mule of his with a brother at his side whose name was Kuz ibn 'Alqama (326). Abū Hāritha's mule stumbled and Kuz said, 'May so-and-so stumble', (i.e. curse

him!), meaning the Apostle. Abū Hāritha said, 'Nay, but may you stumble.' 'But why, brother?' he asked. 'Because by God he is the Prophet we have been waiting for'. Kuz said, 'then if you know that, what stops you from accepting him?' He replied, 'the way these people have treated us. They have given us titles, paid us subsidies, and honoured us. But they are absolutely opposed to him, and if I were to accept him they would take from us all that you see.' Kuz pondered over the matter until later he adopted Islam, and used to tell this story, so I have heard (327)."

This anecdote puts a different construction on the Bishop's agreement with his two companions in foregoing the *mubāhala*. Their decision was joint and it was a matter of no material significance and could hardly have any political implication, if 'Abd al-Masiḥ was the first to speak on behalf of a delegation of sixty riders, representing the Christians of Najrān. The Bishop of Najrān was highly honoured by the Byzantine emperor and was thus perhaps a personage of greater eminence than 'Abd al-Masiḥ. As such, it seems to be a matter of little consequence if he belonged to Bakr ibn Wā'il, a tribe outside the town of Najrān (as pointed out by Slomp at pages 124-5).

To resume the quotation from *The Life of Muḥammad*²⁷, when the Najrānite leaders left the Apostle and consulted with the 'Aqīb, he said, 'O Christians, you know right well that Muḥammad is a Prophet sent (by God) and he has brought a decisive declaration about the nature of your master. You know too that a people has never invoked a curse on a Prophet and seen its elders live and its youth grow up. If you do this you will be exterminated. But if you decide to adhere to your religion and to maintain your doctrine about your master, then take your leave of the man and go home.' So they came to the Apostle and told him that they had decided not to resort to cursing and to leave him in his religion and return home.

It is too bad that the Najrānite Christians, who survived as a distinct community for quite a few centuries, did not preserve any record of this momentous event, which resulted in a long-standing treaty. But, in the absence of the other side of the medallion, we have to fall back on the available portraiture and cannot dismiss it altogether as a figment of the imagination. Human nature being what it is, both Christian and Muslim sources have their prejudices.

The subsequent conversion of 'Abd al-Masiḥ and Kuz, the Bishop's brother, to Islam, and the Bishop's own confession seem to explain sufficiently why the Najrānite delegation backed out of the *mubāhala*. The use of the epithet 'Prophet sent (by God)' by 'Abd al-Masiḥ for the Prophet was in a *tete-a-tete* among his own comrades and could not possibly have diplomatic nuances. The theological argument advanced by Slomp is also not very clear (page 125). Because, though the offer of *mubāhala* had arisen out of the argument over the nature of Jesus Christ, this argument itself had developed from the Prophet's initial questioning of the delegation why they had not embraced Islam and from their pun on the verb 'Islam', meaning 'to submit (to God)'.

Treaty with Najrān

Ameer 'Ali does not appear to be altogether wrong in talking of the conquest of Najrān²⁸. Because, *The Life of Muḥammad*²⁹ describes at some length Khālid ibn

Walid's conversion of the tribe Banū al-Ḥārith ibn Ka'b in Najrān, when the Apostle sent him in the month of Rabī' al-Akhir or Jumādā'l-Ūlā in the year 10 A.H. there to, and ordered him to invite them to Islam three days before he attacked them.

As to the annual tribute of 2,000 *ḥullās* (robes) by the Najrānite Christians under the Treaty, the imposition does not appear to be on the high side. According to al-Balādhurī³⁰, each *ḥullā* was to be of 40 *dirhems*, which totals 80,000 *dirhems* for 2,000 *ḥullās*. He further says that in the time of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the people of Najrān had increased in number to 40,000. This works out to no more than two *dirhems* per head per annum.

Second Caliph 'Umar and Treaty with Najrān

It seems that usury had perhaps become so widespread by 20 A.H. as to amount to violation of the contract, justifying expulsion of the Najrānite Christians by the second caliph 'Umar. The overriding consideration must have been the Prophet's decision during his last illness that there should not remain two religions in the land of Arabia. If stray non-Muslims still continued to live in remote parts of the Peninsula, this should be ascribed to faulty enforcement.

Probably, the Treaty with Najrān was renewed by Abū Bakr before *Ridda* ('Apostasy'). That Najrān had got involved somewhat in *Ridda* strengthens the charge that, as adjudged by 'Umr, they had become a menace, more so because of their increasing numbers. It is worth recalling that in the past their relations had stretched from Abyssinia to Byzantium. What lends further support in retrospect to the charge of being a menace is their involvement decades later in the revolt of Ibn al-Ash'ath against al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, when he was made Governor of 'Irāq. He had, therefore, raised the number of robes (which had previously been reduced) to 1800.

Al-Balādhurī also reports that the people of Najrān having increased in number to 40,000, became jealous of one another and came to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb saying, "Transplant us from the land". 'Umar had considered them a menace to the Muslims, so he took the opportunity and expelled them from the land.

Slomp himself has taken a charitable view of 'Umar's "measures dictated by the desire to consolidate and integrate a vastly expanding Muslim Empire" (*vide p. 127*).

'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz very justly reduced the number to 200 robes, i.e., one-tenth of their original 2,000, when the census showed that they were reduced to one-tenth of their original number. Incidentally, they do not seem to have held the Muslims responsible for their decimation. There must have been, of course, substantial conversions to Islam. 'Umar II took the mild view that the terms of the Treaty had imposed a tax on their heads and not on their lands. Accordingly, he annulled the poll-tax of the dead and those who had embraced Islam. It might have been some source of consolation to them that the lands allotted to some 40,000 Christian souls in 'Umar I's time fell in the time of 'Umar II to the lot of only 2,000 Christians — excluding, of course, the holdings of those Najrānite Christians who had embraced Islam.

Conclusions

In the light of the first issue of *Islamochristiana*, 1975³¹, it seems desirable that the Muslim-Christian dialogues (if they are not for the present enlarged to cover followers of other religions also) should be organised by Muslims as well as Christians. The participant Muslims and Christians should not only be equal in numbers, but as far as practicable equal in other significant respects also — a condition not easy to fulfil. For instance, it is a sad reality that whereas there are hundreds of superb Christian and Jewish scholars of Islam, Muslim scholars equally well-versed in Christian or Jewish studies can perhaps be counted on the fingers of one hand. Fruitful and meaningful meetings of the minds are possible only between intellectuals of comparable, wide ranges of learning covering the gamut of the three monotheistic faiths, at least.

Unexceptionable and laudable as the motives for the dialogues have been during the past decade, Pakistan should break fresh ground for such a dialogue.

NOTES

1. Rev. Jan Slomp, "*The Meeting of the Prophet Muḥammad with Christians from Najrān and the Present Muslim-Christian Dialogue*" (a cyclostyled paper), presented at the first International Sirat Congress on March 4, 1976 at Rawalpindi and again at a meeting at the Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi, on March 27, 1976. The cyclostyled paper has been reproduced in the "*Message of the Prophet: A selection of articles read at the first International Congress on Sirat 1976, Pakistan*" published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, (Rabi' al awwal, 1397, February 1977) at pages 118-132.

However, a sub-paragraph of about seven lines between sub-paragraphs 2 and 3 at p. 123; a paragraph of about three lines preceding the heading "The treaty with Najrān" at p. 125; and about nine lines at the end of the first paragraph, under the heading "the Treaty with Najrān," which appears at pp. 125-6, have been omitted from the printed text of the paper by the author himself.

2. Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrdom of Najrān - New Documents* (Bruxelles: Bollandistes, 1971), pp. 7-8.
3. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, (Leiden: Brill, 1960), s.v. "Abraha" by A.F. L. Beeston.
4. Jan Slomp, *Dialogue*, p. 120.
5. A.F.L. Beeston, *op. cit.*
6. 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān - Text, Translation & Commentary*, 2 vols. (Lahore: Ashraf, 1967), 2: 1793; and Maulawī Muḥammad 'Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān - Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore: Aḥmadiyyah Anjuman-e-Ishā'at-e Islam, 1973), p. 1209.
7. Jan Slomp, *Dialogue*, p. 120.
8. *The Urdū Encyclopaedia of Islam* (The University of the Panjab, Lahore, 1964),

Vol. 1, pp. 381-9. Prof. M. Hamidullah's second article on Abraha, which follows translation of Beeston's article referred to above.

9. A. Guillaume, *New Light on the Life of Muhammad* (Manchester: University Press, n.d.; Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph No. 1), p. 14.
10. Slomp, *Dialogue*, p. 120. Irfan Shahid, *op. cit.*, p. 268; and Hamza al-Isfahani, *Ta'rikh* (Beirut, 1961), p. 113.
11. L.E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia* (Cambridge: University Press, 1933), p. 11.
12. M. Hamidullah, *op. cit.*, and Irfan Shahid, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-42 (The Chronology).
13. Hamidullah, *op. cit.*
14. Slomp, *op. cit.*, p. 120 and Irfan Shahid, *op. cit.*, p. 268.
15. Slomp, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-122.
16. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, s.v. "Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd" by R. Paret.

The relevant verses of the Qur'ān (85:4-10) and their translation are as follows:

قتل اصحاب الاخدود النار ذات الوقود اذ هم عليها قعود وهم على ما يفعلون
 بالمؤمنين شهود وما نقموا منهم الا ان يوسنوا بالله العزيز الحميد

(4-9) "Slain be those of the trench, of the fire fed with fuel, (lo) when they are sitting by it (i.e. the fire), which they are witnesses of what they do (were doing) with the believers!" (E.I.2, *op. cit.*)

(10) "They had naught against them save that they believed in Allah, the Mighty, the Owner of Praise." (Pickthall, *The Glorious Qur'ān*).

17. 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī, *op. cit.*, p. 2: 1714.
18. Irfan Shahid, *op. cit.*
19. Al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*. English trans. P.K. Hitti (Beirut: Khayats, 1966, reprint), pp. 98-105.
20. Slomp, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
21. Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*, 2 vols. Urdū trans. S. Moinul Haq (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1967), 1:418-20.
22. Mikel de Epalza, "Cordova welcomes Its Muslim Friends," *The Muslim World*, (April 1975), 65: 132-136.
23. S.J. Samartha, ed. *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Papers presented at the Broumana Consultation, 12-18 July 1972* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1973).
- 23a. Ibn Sa'd, *op. cit.*
24. A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad, A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 14 ff. & 179.

25. G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 163.
 26. A. Gillaume, *op. cit.*, pp. 270.
 27. *Ibidem.*
 28. Ameer 'Alī, *The Spirit of Islam* (London: Christophers, 1922; reprint), p. 273.
 29. A. Gillaume, *op. cit.*, pp. 645-8.
 30. Al-Balādhuri, *op. cit.*
 31. Published by the Centre of Studies for Muslim-Christian Dialogue, Piazzadi S. Apollinare 49, Rome, Italy.
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